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ABSTRACT

Literature instructors become frustrated as they read poorly written student essays. The problem is partly the students' lack of experience: they have not read a lot or written a lot. Literature classes can be more interesting and effective if teachers coordinate two kinds of emphases: allowing for discovery and moving toward productivity. In working to improve student writing, it is important to recognize points of convergence between reader response and writing across the curriculum. Both of these points of convergence help students to become familiar with somebody else's language and world and to fashion their own voices and roles within that language and world. Teachers should keep certain principles in mind as they develop assignments to improve student writing: (1) respect the process; (2) nourish the participants; (3) aim for a variety of products; and (4) reflect on product, process, and participants. Students and teachers can learn together about literature, about life, and about the mutual interplay of literature and life. (Thirteen references are listed.) (SG)

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Sitting Swimmers and Stuffed Armadillos in Sundresses: Reader-Response and Classroom Creativity

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The idea for this paper grew out of two strands of personal experience, one negative and one positive. The negative strand was the frustration of reading too many ho-hum essays by literature students--a frustration that reminds me of going to arts and crafts fairs and seeing table after table of predictable stuff. Some years it's door wreaths made out of plastic loops from six packs; other times it's necklaces fashioned from chili pods. There are the unusual items, like my titular stuffed armadillos in sundresses; but too much of what passes for creativity suffers from either triteness or tackiness, if not both.

Now, I do have to pause long enough to compliment those artsy-crafters; they've at least created something, and often they're making skillful use of fragments of stuff that would otherwise cram our poor landfills. Likewise, even a mediocre essay on literature demonstrates that our students are assembling fragments that might otherwise be relegated to the trash heaps of their minds. But the problem of predictability, stemming from lack of real thought, remains. Students create forgettable essays if they haven't somehow learned to make the unique connections between what Richard McGuire calls the mind of the work and the mind of the reader (62).

The problem is partly lack of experience: students haven't read a lot and haven't written a lot. They're like hobbyists who haven't traveled to enough shows to sample a wide range of creative output. But (back to the classroom) we teachers often

compound the problem. In literature classes, where students should be learning to read and interpret, we teachers do all the fun stuff: we get to design the lessons, ask the questions, provide the interpretations, and judge the exhibits. This is parallel to the situation that Sharon Crowley describes in A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction: composition teachers, Crowley says, do more writing than their students do. Not only do teachers "write the syllabus, the assignments, and the daily lesson plans;" they also "re-write the textbook in the sense that they interpret it for their students; and finally, they write (revise, edit, grade) their students' papers" (35).

Some people, sensing my as-yet implicit emphasis on student responsibility, may fear that I'm advocating philosophies which end up encouraging mediocrity by a different route. Obviously, we do need to give students models of skillful reading. But if we model all the time, we're like swimming teachers who display our skills in the water but never let our students plunge in. We may talk brilliantly and inspiringly about the delights of swimming; we may dazzle our audiences with our grace and endurance. But if we never invite them into the pool, and if they're too polite, too bewildered, or too lazy to insist on jumping in, they may have lost their only chance to learn how to swim. That might be a relief to terrified students, but it's also a waste of a golden opportunity.

So how do we entice students into the literary equivalents of swimming pools and artisans' workshops? And, once they're in, how do we prevent them from choking on trivia or drowning in

bewilderment? Just as swimming instructors must teach students to coordinate breathing and movement, I want to argue that our literature classes will be both more interesting and more effective if we coordinate two kinds of emphases: allowing for discovery and moving toward productivity.

This conviction grows from what I earlier referred to as a positive strand of experience--namely, the realization that I read more alertly when I'm working on a project. It doesn't matter whether the project is one day's lesson plan, a whole semester's syllabus, or an article for publication; I'm making something; I'm investing myself in it; and I care about whether my audience finds it truthful and beautiful.

I find a key to my alertness in an old book on spirituality, called The Heart of Man. The author, Gerald Vann, argues that "If you are not making, you cannot possibly be happy, because it is the destiny of every man to be a maker" (92). Making is active--it's a way of turning naturally from sheer receptivity (if there is such a thing) to participation.

Now, many of us insist that we do require our students to make things all the time. They aren't just sitting there taking notes; they've got essays to write and exams to take. But all too often, we're like our own students, forgetting to transfer to literature courses what we've taught and learned in composition classes. We typically insist too soon on a product to be evaluated, so that if our students are inexperienced readers or writers, what we're asking them to make are the implements of their undoing: we're requiring them to weave the ropes for their own hanging.

How do we collaborate with our students, then, in fashioning life rafts instead of hanging nooses? My response is that we should begin by recognizing the points of convergence between reader response and writing across the curriculum. Among the insights growing from that convergence, I see one as crucial here: that making sense and making things are intimately related activities. If we believe that comprehending and creating are mutually influential, then our assignments to make things should be aimed at providing students with the tools to create their own meanings more confidently and competently.

Both reader-response and writing-across-the-curriculum aim at helping people do two separate but closely related things: one, getting familiar with somebody else's language and world; and two, fashioning one's own unique voice and role within that language and world. The combination is like learning to speak a new language: you want to master the rules so that you can participate in conversation, but you also want, eventually, to express your own thoughts in your own style.

In the literary universe, I see us moving toward those goals by keeping in mind a handful of principles as we develop assignments. I'll quickly sketch out those principles and then elaborate on them. The guidelines or principles are these: one, respect the process; two, nourish the participants; three, aim for a variety of products; and four, reflect together on process, product, and participants.

First, the process. "In my end is my beginning," as Eliot says. It helps to visualize the outcome, to watch the expert

gliding through the water or forming the clay at the wheel. In the case of literary study, we have two sets of experts, the writers and the critics. Reading the text is indispensable, and it may help to let students see what a really good interpretation or commentary sounds like. If professional critics are too intimidating, we can show our students what their peers in the recent past have written.

But then we move on to show how people arrive at their expert interpretations. Making sense happens in jagged ways, and most often it starts with making observations. "[T]he power of observation," as Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen say in Beat Not the Poor Desk, "is a primal and identifying power. . . . an observation identifies the observer and the work--or makes that identification conscious--and releases for the observer some of the energy of the literature. . . " (161).

Observations are often fragmentary, and it's valuable to recognize that. As James Marshall notes, we've learned in composition teaching to respect first drafts--so why not cherish the literary equivalent, what Marshall calls the "articulation of first readings"? "First readings," Marshall goes on to say, are "the necessary if insufficient first step in discovering what one thinks, even when these early discoveries are later abandoned" (55).

If we insist that our students write frequently--for instance, by keeping reading journals--if we use those writings as ways of discovering and thinking rather than strictly as ways of determining grades, then we're likely to get better products when we do want a piece of writing refined for evaluation. In short,

making things helps us make sense, but the things we make don't always have to be completed, polished creations. This valuing of fragments is one of the insights that William Covino emphasizes in The Art of Wondering. Likewise, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, in Ways of Reading, urge students, "Think of yourself . . . as a writer intent on opening a subject up rather than closing one down" (15).

The process is only as good as its participants. When I say that we need to nourish the participants, I mean that we should help them fertilize their thoughts by engaging in discussion, taking part in both large and small groups. Once they've written, they have something to talk about. They need to be affirmed both by one another and by us. Where appropriate, we should praise both their discoveries and their language, their expression of those discoveries; this double affirmation recognizes that in their own small ways they are also creating literature. We can provide this affirmation by showing students where their comments provide us with new angles on the literature; we can read aloud or publish in handouts the best sentences or paragraphs from a batch of journals or essays; we can ask the writers to elaborate aloud on sketchily presented insights.

Nourishing the participants is also aided by following the third principle, encouraging the creation of a variety of products. I've already referred to the keeping of journals, which can be done in a variety of ways: they can be free-form, they can be responses to study questions, and so on. Essays, too, can of course take a great variety of shapes: character analyses,

letters to the authors, examination of historical contexts, etc. Some of the most thought-provoking ideas I've seen for literary essays come from a series of articles in Freshman English News by Frederick Lang, who emphasizes the role of students as writers operating among the more experienced writers of the literary texts. Whatever approach we use, if we're going to be consistent about implementing the insights of reader-response theory and of writing-across-the-curriculum, then we should think seriously about guiding students toward their own choice of topics, and we should assist them throughout the process of creation, drawing from journals, commenting on drafts, and so on.

I'm still reflecting on ways of allowing the convergence of reader-response and writing-across-the-curriculum to influence my writing of exams in literature classes, so I'll touch on that topic only briefly. I do see it as valuable to have students themselves suggest possible questions for exams, to give them study guides so that they have time to reflect and collect their ideas.

One other approach to creativity that I've been using for the past couple of years is to have students, working in groups of three or four, create ten-minute presentations on each piece of literature that we study. I urge them to use visual aids so that we have something to look at besides their moving mouths, and they've come up with things like puppet shows on Phaedra, call-in shows asking Emily Dickinson for her interpretation of some of her poemss, and so on. Here again, the students have to make sense out of the literature in order to make up a presentation that will keep the attention of the audience and clarify the

meaning of the readings. Everyone then has some visual experience to associate with the literature, and the group doing the presentation probably has a lasting bond with that literary work.

Making things--doing presentations, writing essays, etc.--makes visible each reader's way of making sense. As John Gage puts it in his text on argumentation, The Shape of Reason, "Writing is thinking that can be stopped and tinkered with" (3). Thus my last principle grows naturally out of the others: we can all benefit from reflecting on the participants, the process, and the products. We can think more readily about our own thinking when we put that thinking into some visible form. Here again, journals can be helpful; so can periodic (not just end of the term) course evaluations. If we regularly ask students what they've learned, how they learned it, what else they hope to learn, and how we could help them learn it, we're giving them further opportunities to take responsibility for directing the course of their own learning--and we're allowing them to teach us how to collaborate most effectively with them.

Students do need to have confidence that we know our material--that we can swim in the literary pool, that we can set up our own interpretive booths in the artistic fairs; but they also need to know how to do the same things themselves. Now, I can't claim that my teaching has yet inspired the gigantic transformations that I dream of: my students aren't always keeping up with the reading in order to participate fully in discussion; they haven't yet produced the dazzling interpretive essays that beg for publication. I know that's partly because I still have a

lot to learn as a teacher and partly because my students have a lot to learn about being ideal literary scholars. Some of them don't care if they ever get that far. But I keep theorizing and tinkering with curriculum because I see all these efforts as reaching beyond the classroom and into everyday life. I'm encouraged in these thoughts by James Britton, who paraphrases Wolfgang Iser's The Art of Reading, saying that

> the experience of reading a work of fiction will tend to have the effect on a reader of making real life more 'observable.' The 'pattern-forming' activity involved in responding to a work of fiction is sustained, perhaps, as a reader returns to contemplating his or her own situation. (223)

So, if we're not just showing off our robes of initiation into the mysteries of interpretation but also instructing students in the delights and dilemmas of the process, we're likely to all be learning together--learning about literature and about life, and about their mutual interplay. And that's more satisfying than trudging wearily past one more row of those stuffed armadillos.

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